

## ➤ The Return of the Sphinx: State Fetishism and Political Discourse in Peronist Argentina

**Summary:** Peron's return to Argentina in 1973 was staged as a masterpiece of political rhetoric. This was the point of departure for a new Argentina built on myths of the past, but Peron was going to become the victim of his own rhetorical success. His virtuosity of the 50s in managing and hiding contradictions behind personal cult is not there anymore. A characterization of the political and rhetorical content of that event is used as the threshold for a study of the political uses of fetishism in Peronist discourse and different "texts" related to it.

Si he vuelto a ser protagonista de la historia una y otra vez, fue por que me contradije. Ha oído ya la estrategia de Schlieffen. Hay que cambiar de planes varias veces al día y sacarlos de a uno cuando nos hacen falta. ¿La patria socialista? Yo la he inventado. ¿La patria conservadora? Yo la mantengo viva. Tengo que soplar para todos lados, como el gallo de la veleta. Y no retractarme nunca sino ir sumando frases. La que hoy nos parece impropia puede servirnos mañana. Barro y oro, barro y oro.... Usted sabe que yo no digo malas palabras, pero para la historia no hay sino una. La historia es una puta, López. Siempre se va con el que paga mejor. Y cuantas más leyendas le añadan a mi vida, tanto más rico soy y con tantas más armas cuento para defenderme. Déjelo todo tal como está. No es una estatua lo que busco sino algo más grande. Gobernar a la historia. Cogerla por el culo (Martínez 1985: 218).

On June twentieth, 1973, Juan Domingo Perón was about to fulfill a national dream. After years of exile he was coming back to reconstruct the very same prosperity that he made possible in the forties and fifties. After years of continuous instability under civil or military governments, he promised another strong and stable period like the one some Argentineans remembered and others had imagined. After years during which it was forbidden even to refer publicly to Perón or Evita, he was going to be back to visibility, back home. His return was a promise become icon. His promises were the indexes of another new Argentina, an adult one this time, a country that was about to find or maybe recover an identity.

This is the story of a failure, the dramatic wreckage of Argentinean self-identification through the iconolatry of Perón and Evita. The access to the symbolic order, to the

---

\* *Alberto Medina is Assistant Professor at Boston University. He has published articles about Golden Age Spain, Peninsular and Latin American Contemporary Poetry and Political Performance in the Spanish Transition. He is the Author of Exorcismos de la memoria: políticas y poéticas de la melancolía en la España de la transición. (2001). e-mail: medina@bu.edu*

adult age, became a scandalous shattering of the mirror. Perón, the icon that served as a model of identification, was not going to help Argentina recognize itself, but rather, his presence was going to shatter the nation into pieces. The threshold of paradise turned into that of hell, the “dirty war”.

Perón was not only a political dream, his return also marked the end of the national epic. If exile was the natural condition of Argentines (“En la Argentina no hay más hogar que el exilio”; Martínez 1985: 12), the return was their dream. Perón was the one who returned and under the best conditions: he had the power. There was nobody like him to fulfill the promise of Gardel: “Mi Buenos Aires querido, cuando yo te vuelva a ver, no habrá más penas ni olvido”.

To come back home was to inhabit a tango that not only lamented a loss but also promised a recovery. Two tangos in particular are privileged examples of this: “Volver”<sup>1</sup> and “Mi Buenos Aires querido”<sup>2</sup>, probably two of the best known songs that Gardel popularized.

Both tangos tell the same story, a story of hope but also of fear. To return is not a free choice but an order from destiny. There are no reasons. You just have to go back (“Aunque no quise el regreso siempre se vuelve al primer amor”; “Hoy que la suerte quiera que te vuelva a ver / ciudad porteña de mi único querer”). Both titles reflect the same idea. What is important is not going back to love or happiness but the absolute drive to the origin inscribed in a depersonalized action, “Volver”, or the point of departure and return, “Buenos Aires”. The return follows a fetishistic logic: It is the commemoration of a loss and the overinscription of the recovery. The story is not about a recuperation of the same but about a hypertrophy and a dissemination of the lost object: The origin, Buenos Aires, is hyper visible, the subject becomes visible only through its mediation. On the other hand, the return has no subject. It is presented as a collective, general condition, “vol-

<sup>1</sup> “Yo adivino el parpadeo / de las luces que a lo lejos, / van marcando mi retorno. / Son las mismas que alumbraron, / con sus pálidos reflejos, / hondas horas de dolor. / Y aunque no quise el regreso, / siempre se vuelve al primer amor. / La quieta calle donde el eco dijo: / Tuya es su vida, tuyo es su querer, / bajo el burlón mirar de las estrellas / que con indiferencia hoy me ven volver. // Volver, / con la frente marchita, / las nieves del tiempo / platearon mi sien. / Sentir / que es un soplo la vida, / que veinte años no es nada, / que febril la mirada / errante en las sombras / te busca y te nombra. / Vivir / con el alma aferrada / a un dulce recuerdo, / que lloro otra vez. // Tengo miedo del encuentro / con el pasado que vuelve / a enfrentarse con mi vida. / Tengo miedo de las noches / que, pobladas de recuerdos, / encadenen mi soñar. / Pero el viajero que huye / tarde o temprano detiene su andar. / Y aunque el olvido que todo destruye / haya matado mi vieja ilusión, / guardo escondida una esperanza humilde, / que es toda la fortuna de mi corazón” (Letra: Alfredo Le Pera; música: Carlos Gardel, 1935; en Romano 1995: 265s.).

<sup>2</sup> “Mi Buenos Aires querido / cuando yo te vuelva a ver, / no habrá más penas ni olvido. / El farolito de la calle en que nací / fue el centinela de mis promesas de amor, / bajo su quieta lucecita yo la vi / a mi pebeta luminosa como un sol. / Hoy que la suerte quiere que te vuelva a ver, / ciudad porteña de mi único querer, / y oigo la queja / de un bandoneón, / dentro mi pecho pide rienda el corazón. // Mi Buenos Aires / tierra florida / donde mi vida terminaré. / Bajo tu amparo / no hay desengaños, / vuelan los años, / se olvida el dolor. / En caravana, / los recuerdos pasan, / con una estela / dulce de emoción. / Quiero que sepas / que al evocarte, / se van las penas / del corazón. // La ventanita de mi calle de arrabal / donde sonrío una muchachita en flor, / quiero de nuevo yo volver a contemplar / aquellos ojos que acarician al mirar. / En la cortada más maleva una canción / dice su ruego de coraje y de pasión, / una promesa / y un suspirar / borró una lágrima de pena aquel cantar. // Mi Buenos Aires querido / cuando yo te vuelva a ver, / no habrá más penas ni olvido” (Letra: Alfredo Le Pera; Música: Carlos Gardel, 1934; en Romano 1995: 259s.).

ver". Indeed, the figure of the exile inhabits the core of every Argentinean. It is perceived, through those tangos, as the essence of Argentinism. Perón appropriates the imaginary stage of that essence. A privileged example of that appropriation is an article published in 1947, two years after Perón's accession to power. Carlos Astrada's "Surge el hombre argentino con fisonomía propia" was published in *Argentina en marcha*, a collective volume edited by the Comisión Nacional de Cooperación Intelectual, an organism created by Perón to promote and create a kind of Peronist intellectual discourse. The volume includes a wide variety of articles that are tied together by one clear goal: establishing Peronist ideology in university circles. In his contribution, Astrada constructs a meticulous genealogy and characterization of the Argentinean self. For him, its essence refers to a lost origin and its necessary recuperation:

el hombre argentino viene de un plasma mítico, de un arquetipo germinal, de un origen que él olvidó y que, so pena de desertar de sí mismo y traicionar su esencia, tiene que retomar para mantener la continuidad y la progresión de su ser, encaminándolo a su florecimiento (Astrada 1947: 21).

But the natural tendency of the Argentinean inhabiting the endless *pampa* is precisely the escape from that lost origin, a centrifugal movement instead of the desired centripetal one:

El hombre argentino, hombre pampeano [...] es constitutivamente un ser de lejanía, vale decir que es doblemente excéntrico, y a cuyo existir le es, a veces, difícil recuperarse por retorno, recogerse en su propio e inmanente impulso [...] Todo su ser es, en ocasiones no infrecuentes, una sombra en fuga y dispersión sobre su total melancolía, correlato espiritual de la infinitud monocorde de la extensión. Ontológicamente, la melancolía es aquí una inercia totalizadora (Astrada 1947: 23).

The paradigm of that national drama is, of course, the exile *par excellence*: Martín Fierro and his endless wandering through the *pampa* in search of his lost family. The Argentinean is then a melancholic being who needs to overcome the inertial tendency of his sense of loss, the danger of dissemination ("dispersión"). From this point on, Astrada builds the ideal subject of redemption from the mythical core of Martín Fierro. This subject has to be an unknown hero from the people ("un paria") who uses the myth as a potential for regeneration.

El mito no es únicamente producto de épocas primitivas o prehistóricas de la conciencia popular, en las que ésta vela en la sombra germinativa de los orígenes, sino que él puede plasmarse e incrementarse siempre de nuevo, tanto en un incipiente como en un elevado estado de cultura. Cuando esto acontece, el mito, resurrecto, actúa como fermento en la vida histórica de una comunidad y en todas sus empresas de orden espiritual e inclusive en la programación de sus tareas pragmáticas. Retomar un mito supone el retorno a un modelo de vida nutrido e impulsado por las auténticas potencias de un gran símbolo viviente. Tal es, para los argentinos, el mito del gaucho, troquelado, en el poema de Hernández, en la figura de Martín Fierro.

[...] el protagonista anónimo de nuestra epopeya es tan sólo un paria, al margen de las preocupaciones tutelares de un estado cuya concepción política fue formada y articulada por esa clase dirigente con retazos y remanentes doctrinarios adquiridos en el extranjero. Sin

embargo, el paria soledoso y errante, el hombre silenciado por cosas y ruidos que llegaban de afuera era infinitamente rico en su pobreza [...] era pues, el insobornable guardador del numen germinal de la nacionalidad (Astrada 1947: 34-37).

Astrada gives a philosophical quality to the very same *topoi* that Perón used in his public discourses: the nationalist recuperation of the people as political actor, the connection of his goals to a transhistorical and transpolitical narrative and, therefore, the total emptying of the political field. His task is not a political one but, precisely, the recuperation of the lost origin to which Astrada refers. His political means are only the threshold of the resurrection of the Argentinean essence. Even without referring explicitly to him, Astrada is locating Perón in the place of the myth. He is the successor of Martín Fierro. But interestingly, Astrada gives to that myth a predominantly visual presence. The myth is where “el hombre, en tanto que unidad inescindible [...] contempla figurativamente, es decir, en imágenes, las omnipotentes fuerzas del ser y sus manifestaciones telúricas y vitales” (Astrada 1947: 34). The myth is seen as an icon of identification and integration (“unidad inescindible”) but also as a fetishistic locus. As in Gardel’s tangos, this myth becomes a visual signifier, be it either Martín Fierro or Perón, that works as a constant reminder of the loss of the origin but also as overinscription of that same origin, “las omnipotentes fuerzas del ser y sus manifestaciones telúricas y vitales” (Astrada 1947: 25). Thus, Perón has to be the one who returns to the origin, the one who comes back from the pointless wandering through the *pampas* to rebuild his country from its very foundation by means of his privileged knowledge of its essence.

Following that mythical narrative in 1943, Perón gave his first appearances in the public arena a very concrete shape: that of the arrival and the possibility of reconstructing an essence lost in the absence of the “exile”. As Sigal and Verón have studied, his first speech after his landing in 1973 reiterates a schema already present in his establishing discourse of the forties:

La presencia de una suerte de “modelo general de llegada” se manifiesta si recorremos el conjunto de la producción discursiva de Perón.

En primer lugar, Perón es alguien que viene de afuera. Si ese “exterior” desde el cual llega es en 1973, el exterior geográfico del exilio, en sus primeros discursos era un exterior abstracto, por así decirlo, extrapolítico: el cuartel.

[...] la relación que se establecerá entre Perón y el pueblo [es una] relación de exterioridad: “llego a vosotros para deciros que no estáis solos en vuestros anhelos de redención social” (Sigal/Verón 1986: 29s.).

Perón comes in the forties from an abstract but, as we have seen, also mythical sphere. He is the reincarnation of a myth coming from a non-historical space:

[...] es en el espacio a-histórico del cuartel que la constatación de la degradación del país se efectúa y donde la decisión de intervenir se toma: el pasaje del cuartel al estado sólo podrá ser definido, en consecuencia, como fundado en los valores inmutables de la patria. Dicho de otra manera: ese “panorama desolador” del país será absorbido por el tiempo mítico de la patria (Sigal/Verón 1986: 37).

In 1973, that non-historical space was geographic exile. For almost twenty years, Perón had been located in a kind of latent absence. His words had been scarce and often

contradictory due to his legal incapacity to talk about politics. Their function had much more to do with a deictic reminder of Perón's distant presence than with real communication of some content.<sup>3</sup> The results of that situation, quite possibly an intended strategy, had been the extraordinary proliferation of divergent readings of Peronism.

In his second arrival, both the return and the exile are fetishized. Perón was the imaginary subject where all the dreams converge, the locus of imaginary loss, the hypertrophied substitute of himself. Perón was going to get larger and larger to the point of ubiquity, supplanting/following the trace and the promise left by Evita: "Volveré y seré millones". He was going to be everywhere, leading every political option from the extreme right associated with his own personal secretary, López Rega, to the extreme left of the Montoneros.

Days before the arrival, thousands of Argentines camped near the airport of Ezeiza waiting for their leader. The number of people grew incessantly. More than one million were said to be waiting for Perón. Visually dominant were three immense pictures: Perón on an upper level and on a slightly inferior level, Evita to his right and Isabel to his left.

The images worked as an invocation to the leaders, a welcome, but also as a visual center for all present. It is the center of the circumference, the point of integration and convergence and the mythical icon that Astrada described as a reminder of the telluric origin where man as "unidad inescindible" contemplates his essence. As we have seen, Perón is THE Argentinean, the paradigmatic exile, successor of Martín Fierro, who returns after inhabiting Gardel's tangos. He is the specular image of identification for a full nation and its imaginary. Beyond this, however, the position of the images has a veiled referent, the foundational scene of Catholicism: Christ between the two thieves, the repentant one to his right and the unrepentant one to his left. In this particular adaptation of the drama, the maternal goodness of Evita and the venomous evil femininity of Isabel, who will betray the doctrine of the leader. Not only these persons were invoked but also a history that had not yet happened. This moment, this day, was expected to be the (re)foundational scene of a new/old Argentina, the true Argentina. As in 1945, Perón was going to initiate reconstruction in a massive public ceremony. The event of the arrival in 1973 had been staged as a perfect repetition of the one on 10-17-1945. It was to be a renovation of the contract between Perón and the people that had been established in "Plaza de Mayo". After the moment of the arrival came the moment of integration and identification with the people. The crucial words of Perón's speech in front of the people who had 'rescued' him from captivity marked then the crossing of borders: Perón was no longer a military man located outside of the people, but part of that same people, 'un descamisado más':

Dejo el honroso uniforme que me entregó la patria para vestir la casaca civil y confundirme con esa masa sufriente y sudorosa que elabora el trabajo y la grandeza de la patria. Con esto doy un abrazo final a esa institución que es un puntal de la patria, el ejército. Y doy también el primer abrazo a esa masa grandiosa que representa la síntesis de un sentimiento que había muerto en la república: la verdadera civilidad del pueblo argentino. Esto es el pueblo (quoted in Plotkin 1993: 93).

<sup>3</sup> The uses and meaning of Perón's words in exile have been meticulously studied in Sigal/Verón (1986: 91-129).

The soldier becomes people in a self-sacrificial gesture with obvious Christian resonances. The embrace/crucifixion of the prophet redeems his people and gives them a future. On the other hand, the moment of integration is also perceived as a direct contact between the leader and the people, a form of perfect transparency without obstacles or mediators. It is that ideal communication which frames and makes the mythical/social contract possible. There are no institutions, no state, no politics: just the leader and his people.

After 1945, Perón used every seventeenth of October (“Día de la Lealtad”) and first of May (“Día de los Trabajadores”) to renovate his apolitical contract with the people (Plotkin 1993: part II). This foundational gesture became a mode of confirmation and renewal. The display of the three massive photographs in Ezeiza in 1973 is perfectly staged as a recuperation of that ceremony after twenty years of interruption. Everything is going to be the same again, the good old times are back. But reality turned the invocation into a monument, a birth into instantaneous corruption. The very same day when the hope of integration and identity arrived, disintegration was already present.

Everything started as a fight for visibility. Everyone wanted to see Perón from the first row. The privileged places were taken by the conservative groups of Peronism and in particular by those related with López Rega. They had displayed people to impede direct access to Perón by other political groups. They constructed a perfect, hermetic cage for the leader.<sup>4</sup> No one could cross it. But the Montoneros and FAR, the radical left wing (both violent groups) did not want to surrender. They wanted to occupy the same place. They wanted to be the first sons to welcome their father:

en el propio palco montarían guardia los matones más ilustres de la derecha, los ángeles custodios de las camarillas sindicales y de Isabel la usurpadora: la patria socialista tendría que abrirse a tiro limpio entre las huestes de la patria reaccionaria (Martínez 1985: 61).

Slowly the tension grew into a small scale fratricidal war. Everybody wanted to be the best son and they would die for it. But the fight was not only to see but also, and perhaps mainly, to be seen:

Nun salió de allí con la certeza de que si las masas se desbordaban exigiendo la revolución, el general no vacilaría —como en 1945— en aferrarse a esa bandera. Quien primero gane la calle tendrá en el puño a Perón (Martínez 1985: 60).

To be interpellated by the leader, to be seen and identified by him meant to have access to power and a place in the national fiction of the new Peronist Argentina, so the visibility causes the confrontation between brothers and finally the total failure of the return of the father. The invocation of Perón’s giant portrait was not successful. The image was not the threshold of the presence but its substitute and its negation. The people were not going to see Perón. Due to the uncontrolled violence in Ezeiza, Perón’s

<sup>4</sup> This situation will be further developed by Montoneros in their “teoría del cerco”: “[...] quisieron evitar este reencuentro [entre la juventud y Perón] porque así conservan el cerco que han tendido alrededor de nuestro líder y pueden seguir siendo intermediarios, mintiéndole a Perón sobre lo que dice y piensa el pueblo y mintiéndole al pueblo sobre lo que dice y piensa Perón” (quoted in Sigal/Verón 1986:162).

plane landed in the military airport at Morón, in total invisibility. When he finally appeared in public, in the “Casa Rosada” in front of his people, a thick glass defends him from possible enemies and interferes both with the gaze of the people and his own gaze. The transparency of an immediate presence is irrevocably lost. Perón has become his own monument, the petrified and distant commemoration of himself.

The new dynamics of Perón as fetishistic monument are read in Hector Olivera’s film, *No habrá más penas ni olvido*. It was released in 1983, the same year in which Alfonsín established the first democratic government after the Proceso de Reorganización Nacional. It looks at the beginning from the end through a plot that deals with fraternal confrontations between left and right wing Peronists in a small Argentinian village in 1974, shortly after Perón’s return.<sup>5</sup> The ideological differences grow from insignificance to tragedy. The result of an intended “normalización” of the left wing elements of the village will provoke a familiar civil war between Peronist brothers.

Let us consider the first sequence of the film. The spectator is immediately contextualized in a mythical as well as very real and political space. The myth appears through the mediation of two songs, “Mi Buenos Aires querido”, the source of the title, and the love song of the soundtrack. The former, as stated earlier, refers to a return and a hope. In a slightly different way, the latter talks about the reconstruction of a lost love:

Amar como te amé y tú me amabas  
No puedo vivir sin amar amando  
Amar como te amé y me has amado.

The obsessive reiteration of the same verb works again as an invocation of the lost love. The strategy for getting it is absolute trust in the truth and direct confrontation with the other: “Amar es no hacer trampas, es dar la cara”. The song can be read as a veiled referent to another ubiquitous *topos* in Peronist discourse. The political dichotomy between right and wrong action becomes a non-political, essentialist opposition between true and false:

si el nivel en el que se sitúa el proyecto no es el nivel de la política, si el peronismo es el único modo de reencuentro con la patria misma en las horas graves, es porque ese nivel “otro” es simplemente el nivel de la verdad [...] “la mejor política consiste en decir y defender la verdad” (Sigal/Verón 1986: 55s.).

The divergence in the film between the lyrics of that song in the background and the images that we see could not be more extreme: After an establishing shot that places the spectator in a zone of obscurity but before an imminent access to light, the only face that we see in an extreme close-up some shots later is that of a cardboard dragon entering the city. It is being used to attract the attention of the pedestrians in order to advertise sales (restorative tonics, for example) and concerts. The tension between the songs and the fake commercial dragon (the only one who ‘da la cara’) is presented against a back-

<sup>5</sup> The film is vaguely based on historical events that happened in 1974. The right wing Peronist bureaucrats cleansed left wing elements from some city councils, the most important being Córdoba.

ground of political graffiti dealing with Perón, Evita and “la patria socialista”. In a subsequent scene the conservative Peronists will use the dragon to announce their “*campaña de normalización*”.

The juxtaposition of advertising and the Peronist slogans is another reference to an extraordinary anecdote about the relationship between Perón and López Rega, his most powerful counselor at the end of his life. “Perón was furious to discover in 1967 that López Rega had been marketing in Brazil a restorative tonic that featured a drawing of Perón on the label, with the notation that he retained his youth by drinking this product” (Crassweller 1987: 344). The image of the leader is converted into pure commodity. The sale of the tonic is the sale of a promise without any content, a paradigmatic fetishistic piece of merchandise. The anecdote works as a perfect metaphor of Perón’s offer of a remedy to Argentina in 1973. He is going to restore youth and health to his country. But the promise is just that. Only the image, the fetish, remains.

The interrelations between political and commercial merchandise developed in the film help us read the new fetishistic, monumental and parodic Perón/dragón. In his analysis of commodity fetishism, Marx privileges the erasure of the origin:

[The] appearance of self-generating value gives rise to commodity fetishism, or the disavowal of the source of its value in labor power. This process entails a fantasy disavowal. A commodity’s market success depends on the erasure of the marks of production, any trace of indexicality (Mulvey 1996: 4).

If the secret of the market’s success is the complete erasure of its origins, the secret behind Perón’s success in 1974 is the erasure or at least the manipulation of his past. The only way in which every political tendency from the extreme right to the Montoneros is able to appropriate the figure of Perón is by totally erasing its indexicality. Perón cannot be but an empty reified signifier, a signifier to which any signified can be attributed. It is not a question of meaning but of faith:

Yo sigo siempre la norma de atender a todos porque, no olvide, que ahora soy algo así como el Papa: encargado de la bendición apostólica ‘in urbi et urbis’ [sic]. Dentro de ese concepto, no puedo negar nada dentro de mi infalibilidad (Perón quoted in Sigal/Verón 1986: 109).

Towards the end of the film another scene demonstrates this mobility of Perón as empty signifier: a gunman is about to shoot a defenseless, clownish pilot who tried to help the resistant left-wingers. Before shooting and being shot respectively, the gunman and the pilot shout the same words: “¡Viva Perón!”. One slogan is used to support two positions that are not only different, but mutually exclusive.

The ideal familiar unity associated with Perón<sup>6</sup> turned into an open confrontation between brothers. But when Perón returns, something is lacking. Evita is no longer there.

<sup>6</sup> “Propugnamos la unidad de todos los argentinos. Esta unión de todos los argentinos representa, en mi concepto, la síntesis de todo el contenido filosófico de la revolución del cuatro de junio, y es lo más profundo de ese mismo contenido; es su rumbo y es su objetivo final” (Perón in discourse 8-5-44, quoted in Sigal/Verón 1986: 44).



She was the maternal principle that made unity possible. Even before Evita appears in the political arena that maternal principle is already there. In his foundational discourse on October 1945, Perón makes explicit reference to it: “quiero, en esta oportunidad, como simple ciudadano, mezclado en esa masa sudorosa, estrechar profundamente a todos contra mi corazón, como lo podría hacer con mi madre” (Perón quoted in Sigal/Verón 1986: 46).

The fetishized figure of Perón can only be the commemoration of another loss, a feminine one. Some recent psychoanalytic interpretations of fetishism no longer focus on the masculine aspect of the commemorated object, the penis, or the fear of castration, but on the feminine side of it, the privileged relationship of unity with/in the mother.

The male's sense of body intactness, usually spoken of exclusively in terms of castration fear, also finds its genesis in the child's sense of completeness with the body of the mother. Fear of castration may, in fact, be derived from the original ambivalence concerning union/separation from the mother [...] Fetishism is a protective, idealizing neutralization of time and separation [...] The masochistic fetish signifies the attempt to reconstruct the mother as inseparable plenitude and returns the subject to the eroticized transitional object marking the point of departure from her [...] The disavowal of sexual difference abolishes the father to position the female as ideal ego. She completes the child's identity and makes possible the fantasy of parthenogenetic rebirth, restoring their symbiotic union [...] (Studlar 1988: 42s.)

“Volveré y seré millones”: The parthenogenetic utopia of Evita is commemorated through Perón. He is in everyone, everyone is in him. National unity, the ideal family beyond difference is what the fetish of Perón is meant to restore. But the results are extraordinarily perverted: the fetishistic father dies without being able to recover that unity. The surrogate mother, Isabelita, betrays the original, Evita. She is no longer a mother but a sexualized and evil woman.

But the fetishization of Perón has still another mythical facet: History. The political discourse of Peronism develops a very concrete conception of history in which a linear progression is substituted by circular repetition. Nothing is new but only a return to the glorious moments and figures of the Argentinean past.<sup>7</sup> In the forties and the fifties, that conception inhabits the Peronist textbooks for primary schools where the figure of Perón is continuously compared to that of San Martín or the literary character Martín Fierro.<sup>8</sup> The same strategy is recovered in the seventies by the Montoneros in a different context. Perón's systematic refusal of young left-wing elements within his own party after his arrival is answered by these with a substitution: The ‘real’ Perón, still alive, will be supplanted by his own monument. The leader, in 1973, is totally overlapped by his own mythified, already historical version. *El descamisado*, the main periodical associated

<sup>7</sup> “La historia [...] no es presentada como un proceso sino como una sucesión de momentos cruciales que cambiaron la realidad y que se relacionan con momentos del presente igualmente cruciales. Un componente interesante de la historia oficial peronista es la vinculación de hechos ocurridos durante el gobierno de Perón [...] con eventos importantes del pasado. Este era un mecanismo que permitía otorgar a la política del gobierno una legitimidad indisputada en el plano simbólico al relacionarla con ‘réplicas’ incuestionables del pasado” (Plotkin 1993: 195).

<sup>8</sup> For a study of the content of Peronist primary school textbooks see Plotkin (1993: 171-208).

with Montonero ideology, constantly quotes the historical Perón, not the one who is actually speaking (Sigal/Verón 1986: 178).

Another example of this strategy is Fernando Solanas' film *Los hijos de Fierro* (1976), finished in Paris after Perón's death but planned during his brief return. Solanas associates the figure of Perón with José Hernández's *Martín Fierro* (1872/1879). As we saw in Astrada's piece, Hernández's character was appropriated by Peronist ideology from the very beginning. The film uses that tradition and recontextualizes it within a new ideological frame. The result is something like a Montonero José Hernández reading Fierro/Perón. The first images propose the film as a reconstruction of popular memory, the retelling of Fierro's myth. From that point on, the narrative meticulously intermingles references to Hernández's text and to Argentinean politics, in particular the story of Perón. The intended result is a complete identification of the two figures, the conversion of the political leader into the one Argentine hero, the dissolution of history into myth. The film is divided in the same two parts as the epic poem, "Ida" and "Vuelta". Again the figure of the exile inhabits the core of the Argentinean self: "Mi destino es el retorno, el de todos, el reencuentro" says Perón/Fierro. In the poem, the motives for Fierro's exile and endless persecution are linked to the fracture of his family and destruction of his home. Only in the "Vuelta" is Fierro able to reunite with his sons. In the canto XXIII, Fierro gives some essential advice to his sons, "el hijo mayor", "el hijo menor" and his best friend's son, "Picardía", before they change their names and go off in four different directions: "después, a los cuatro vientos / los cuatro se dirigieron". This scene is situated by Solanas at the beginning of his film. Therefore, the consequent narrative is presented as the adventures of the sons, their development of the father's teachings. There will be a direct link between Fierro/Perón and his sons, here identified with Montonero-like groups. The only thing that changes is the names. The traditional national fetish of Fierro is then totally assimilated by the new fetish of Perón. That move allows us a larger reading of the process of fetishization of Perón's return. This is not only contextualized in a concrete historical moment (1973-4) but it opens the possibility for the reading of a transhistorical national fiction, the "mystical foundations of State authority" (Taussig 1993: 217), "la mística y la doctrina que nuestros enemigos no podrán destruir" (Solanas). Perón and Evita are a very concrete actualization of the uses of fetishization processes by the State, perhaps the greatest success and the worst failure at the same time. Taussig, quoting Philip Adams, explains the mechanism of State fetishism:

The State is not the reality which stands behind the mask of political practice. It is itself the mask which prevents our seeing political practice as it is and starts its life as an implicit construct; it is then reified and acquires overt symbolic identity progressively divorced from practice as an illusory account of practice (Taussig 1993: 219).

Perón is not a particular politician or dictator but, in the same way as traditional fascisms, he *is* the State. But, one step further, one can argue that the Argentinean case is paradigmatic in its clarification of the mythic appropriation of the historical or imaginary past. The fusion is not only between the leader and the state but also between the leader and the core of national identity. The problem is, again, that the only unified national identity possible is an empty signifier that can be filled by anyone –be it either Fierro or Perón– and their drive to origin and return. Indeed, the more distant the fetish is from the commemorated object, the stronger its effects are:

In this peeling off of the signifier from its signified, the representation acquires not just the power of the represented but power over it as well: the representations of the totem are therefore more actively powerful than the totem itself (Taussig 1993: 235).

Paradoxically then, the more monumental, the more reified and distant the figure of Perón is, the more effective its imaginary cohesive power. National unity is possible only over a dead body in that impossible moment when recovery coincides with epiphany, when belief is a mode of memory. The privileged icon of that moment is the embalmed corpse of the saint. Again, the fetish that Perón is, cannot be separated from that other feminine fetish of Evita's definitely reified and eternal body.

The historical logic of the fetishized monumental body is the opposite of what it seems to be. The monument does not commemorate but rather opens a performative space of political discourse. The drive to origin and the drive to repetition cannot be separated from their own performative essence: Fierro is a product of Perón, Perón is a product of the Montoneros or of the extreme right. The corpse is not the end of a life, a memory, but the beginning of its appropriations. Not a closure of the signifier but its absolute opening.

The strategy is in itself transideological. If Solanas and Peronist discourse in general inhabit *Martín Fierro*, Borges and Bioy Casares, from a radically different ideological point of view, rewrite in "La fiesta del monstruo" another foundational fiction: Echeverría's "El matadero". The formless mass that supported Rosas now floods to listen to "el monstruo", a thinly veiled reference to Perón. Nothing has changed. As at the end of *Martín Fierro*, the same history is retold with other names. But obviously it is not the same story. The retelling of the supposedly original fiction is not an obedient mimesis but a meticulous manipulation that uses a mythic transparency to ideologically (re)construct origins and "foundational fictions". As in "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote", the original and the copy are inseparable. The myth is always already something else, the origin is only possible as a return to the future, the map creates the territory. State fetishism overlaps with a kind of historical fetishism, and one step further even a literary one. The loci of 'the state', 'the historical/essential origin' and the 'literary source' are analogous. All of them work as fetishes in the sense that their 'commemoration' is performative. The defense against the lack performs that lack. There are no memories but constructions, no reenounters but performative acts, no referents but beliefs.

## Works Cited

- Astrada, Carlos (1947): "Surge el hombre argentino con filosofía propia". En: V.V. AA.: *Argentina en Marcha*. Buenos Aires: Comisión Nacional de Cooperación Intelectual, pp. 15-58.
- Borges, Jorge Luis/Bioy Casares, Adolfo (1979): "La fiesta del monstruo". En: Borges, Jorge Luis: *Obras Completas en colaboración*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, pp. 392-402.
- Crassweller, Robert D. (1987): *Perón and the Enigmas of Argentina*. New York: WW Norton and Company.
- Martínez, Tomás Eloy (1985): *La novela de Perón*. Buenos Aires: Legasa.
- Mulvey, Laura (1996): *Fetishism and Curiosity*. London: British Film Institute.
- Plotkin, Mariano (1993): *Mañana es San Perón: Propaganda, rituales políticos y educación en el régimen peronista (1946-1955)*. Buenos Aires: Ariel.

- Romano, Eduardo (ed.) (1995): *Las Letras del Tango, Antología Cronológica 1900-1980*. Rosario: Editorial Fundación Ross.
- Sigal, Silvia/Verón, Eliseo (1986): *Perón o muerte: Los fundamentos discursivos del fenómeno peronista*. Buenos Aires: Legasa.
- Studlar, Gaylyn (1988): *In the Realm of Pleasure*. New York: Columbia UP.
- Taussig, Michael (1993): "Maleficium: State Fetishism". En: Apter, Emily/Pietz, William (eds.): *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, pp. 217-247.

## Films:

- Olivera, Héctor (1983): *No habrá más penas ni olvido*.
- Solanas, Fernando (1976): *Los hijos de Fierro*.